

*Praise for The Blind Bowman:
Shadow of the Wolf*

'It's dark and violent, a gory fantasy mashup with Game of Thrones and X-Men in its DNA' Guardian

***'Astonishingly good. ★★★★★'* Sun**

'T.K. Hall has produced an original, savage, powerful and incredibly moving story. He captures the harshness and darkness of the ancient woodland so vividly; it is like the author himself has slid back in time. Robin and Marian are like you have never seen, and I am sure this novel will grip anyone who reads it, as it thoroughly gripped me'

Jilly Cooper, Mail on Sunday

'A bold interpretation that's weird, wild and wonderful . . . Game of Thrones-style'

SFX Magazine

'Magic. If you love Alan Garner, Mythico Wood, wild gods and wild places then read Shadow of the Wolf. Reading this book takes me back to that place in my teens where a book carried me away from all the worries of the world and the chaos in my head to another place. Breathless. Haunting. Wild. Magic' Jackie Morris, co-creator of *The Lost Words* and *The Lost Spells*

'One of the debuts of the year' Books for Keeps

'Mesmerising, don't miss it!' **The Bookseller**

'My favourite book of the year. Beautiful writing, a stunning mix of action and mystical folklore.

A brilliant story'

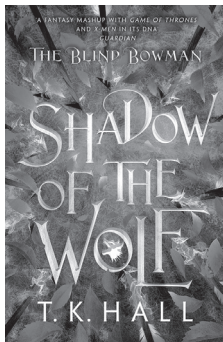
Sally Green, author of Half Bad

'This is the darkest, strangest, and possibly coolest version of Robin Hood I've ever seen. Highly Recommended'

YA Yeah Yeah

'It is incredibly rich in detail, wonderfully written and so unique that this truly is a Robin Hood tale unlike anything you could ever have dreamt of' A Dream of Books

'I truly cannot rave about this book enough. I've always loved the Robin Hood legend and have read quite a few books based around it but none of them clicked with me until Shadow of the Wolf. It is undoubtedly the most interesting, gripping take on the legend I've come across' Reveries of a Bookworm



THE BLIND BOWMAN

DARK
FIRE

T. K. HALL



David Fickling Books

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In Loving Memory of Lynn and Keith Hall

*The Blind Bowman. Shadow of Death. The Phantom Outlaw.
Robin Hood has borne all these names and more.
He was called Robin Loxley once – when he was just a peasant child.
Before the Sheriff took his eyes, and drove him into the ancient heart
of Sherwood. Before he fought the fabled Wargwolf, and won, and
donned its skin. Before he attained his forest powers and wielded them
against the enemies of the wild.*

*Now he bears yet another name: The Forest King.
Together with Marian, his wildwood queen, they have made Sherwood
their fortress, while a host of outlaws have flocked to their cause.*

*But the forces of darkness have also gathered their strength, and are
readying for all-out war. When the two sides clash, in full fury, it will
be enough to scorch the Earth and blacken the sun. It will spark a
storm of fire and call down a rain of blood.*

*Then, so the legends say, Robin Hood will earn his last and true
name.
He will truly become The Guardian of the Forest.
And by his courage, and his sacrifice, hope may yet rise from the
ashes . . .*

Prologue

‘It’s dead all right – the whole town,’ said Fyn MacDair, coming back up the trail just as thunder began to rumble in the distance. ‘I rode as far as the counting house. There’s not a soul anywhere.’

The news, even though it was half-expected, spread disquiet through the war party – knights exchanging glances, squires muttering beneath their breath.

‘. . . an entire market town . . .’

‘. . . must have been two hundred people in Tyrwell . . .’

‘. . . even in these shires? Whole realm a wasteland . . .’

Sitting straight in his saddle, determined not to show his own dismay, Sir Bors addressed the scout. ‘Can you say for certain it wasn’t plague? Did you see any fresh graves?’

‘No, and no crosses on doors either,’ said Sir Fyn. ‘There was a stench, true enough, but not like rotting flesh. More like stagnant water.’

Setting his jaw, Sir Bors stared towards Tyrwell, its highest roofs just visible at the foot of the valley. His question about plague had been a waste of breath. *You know full well it isn’t disease that’s killing this land. It’s a more malignant force.*

He turned to address his men. ‘Hear this, all of you. We cannot outrun this storm. Therefore, we must take shelter

where we find it. But the Sheriff's men have been here ahead of us. MacDair, go on ahead. Take Hawkwood and Tarcel with you. If soldiers are still lurking in these hills I want forewarning.'

As the scouts rode away, Sir Bors kicked his destrier forward, and the remainder of his force clanked into motion behind him.

'You can't truly think anyone would be fool enough to challenge us out here,' said Sir Derrick, at his right-hand side. 'Forty fighting knights and a score of squires. A whole battalion of rangers wouldn't dare stand against us.'

'In days past, perhaps,' said Sir Bors. 'But the Sheriff grows increasingly desperate. And he has been searching for this child a long time.'

Twisting in his saddle, Sir Derrick looked back. 'Can one boy truly be so vital? Each time I look at him I find it harder to believe.'

Looking back himself, Sir Bors inspected his knights, their tabards emblazoned with the emblem of the golden arrow, their silver cloaks billowing in the wind. His gaze came to rest on Ifor Rowland, a young warrior so big and strong he was known on the tourney field as The Destroyer.

And there, perched in front of the knight, was the forest-born child. The boy kept his head bowed and the hood of his tunic raised, his tiny pale hands gripping the pommel of the saddle. The entire time they had been on the road he had barely stirred, and not uttered a single word. Sir Derrick was right, it was hard to imagine such a child tipping the balance in this war. But then Sir Bors had underestimated the forest-born before, and he had vowed never to make such a mistake again.

As thunder rumbled once more, Sir Bors led the retinue onwards, through a landscape that grew increasingly bleak. With Tyrwell deserted, there were no oxgangs to work the town's ploughing land, so crops stank where they had been left to rot. There were no livestock in the pasture – only dead sheep

down by the river. The cartways and the roads were crumbling and overgrown and swirling with dust.

The oppressive atmosphere intensified as they entered the town itself, crossing the old Norman bridge and passing beneath the deserted tollhouse. As they wound up through the eerie streets, the only noise was the clapping of hooves on the cobbles, and a loose shutter banging in the wind, and the skittering of leaves.

‘Those of you not on watch can get some rest,’ Sir Bors told his men as they dismounted near an old coaching inn. ‘These are not the days you dreamed of when you joined the household guard. But our destination is close. This time tomorrow we shall be sitting around campfires, drinking wildwood beer and sharing songs with the outlaws.’

Sir Bors wished he could feel as optimistic as he was trying to sound. As he entrusted his horse to his squire, and he paced alone through the dismal streets, his spirits sank ever lower. He had been to Tyrwell in better days; he remembered the babble from the taverns, and the cajoling of merchants, and the quick games of children in the lanes. Now there was nothing. No life, human or otherwise. Not so much as a stray dog howling at the storm.

As he crossed the market square he saw exactly why this place had died. At the heart of Tyrwell was a sacred spring, where townsfolk had drawn their water for generations. Where pilgrims had come in their thousands to bathe wounds or beg a favour of the gods. But such days were over and would never come again. Because the Sheriff’s men had destroyed the well-head, blocking it with mud and rubble, then poisoning the water with the carcasses of sheep. The water now dribbled into a sick and stagnant pool, which swarmed with mosquitoes.

For a long while Sir Bors did nothing but stare at this degradation, the pestilent vapours raw at the back of his throat. No

matter how many times he had witnessed such scenes – villages where the Sheriff had poisoned sacred streams, or uprooted hallowed trees, or burned ancient groves – they always left him numb, with a feeling almost like grief. Where would this lunacy end? How could people live without their water, without their soil, without the very air to breathe?

Someone went hurrying past, pulling Sir Bors from his reverie.

‘Forgive me, sire,’ Ifor Rowland panted as he ran. ‘I swear, he’s like a wisp. I don’t know how he slipped away.’

Only now did Sir Bors see the forest-born child. He was standing at the northern edge of the market square. With his hood raised, he was staring up and out of the town.

‘Leave the boy with me,’ Sir Bors said, waving the big knight away. ‘I wanted to try speaking with him again in any case.’

Sir Bors went and knelt at the child’s side. Following his gaze, he looked to the horizon. There, sweeping up and away with the hills, was the endless dark mass of Sherwood Forest. Carried on the storm winds, the din of the wildwood was swelling – the treetops churning and roaring like the ocean, the creatures shrieking and barking and bellowing. And beneath all this was a more mysterious sound that shivered the hairs at the back of Sir Bors’ neck. A howling groan so low and so strange it might have been echoing up from within the deep earth.

‘It was a long time ago you were orphaned from the forest,’ Sir Bors said to the boy. ‘No doubt it seems daunting to you now. But trust me, it will be your sanctuary.’

The boy said nothing, only went on staring towards Sherwood.

‘What should I call you?’ said Sir Bors. ‘At least tell me that much. I was told the other boys in your village called you Jack Frost. Have you had other names besides?’

Still no response. Sir Bors sighed heavily as he stood. He

could only trust that the boy would find his tongue eventually – or else this whole quest truly had been a fool's errand.

'So then, come along with me,' the overlord said, turning away. 'We must get you indoors. This storm will hit hard. But it will pass.'

'No, it will not.'

Sir Bors went back, dropped to one knee. 'What was that? Did you speak?'

'You are wrong,' the boy said, his voice tiny beneath the wind. 'The storm will not pass. It will swallow us all. Even the forest will be powerless.'

The boy lowered his hood and turned his head. This was the very first time he had looked squarely at Sir Bors, and for the overlord it was a shock. Because the boy's skin was as pale and unlined as an infant's. But his eyes . . . his eyes were older. They were ice-grey, and weeping. They might have been the eyes of an ancient.

'You are not talking about this storm, here and now,' Sir Bors said, as lightning licked at the forest. 'You may speak freely with me. Tell me – what do you see approaching?'

The boy closed his eyes, and when he opened them again there was a single tear on his cheek, and he was smiling. Despite himself, Sir Bors felt a shiver of something move across his skin.

'It is too late,' the boy said. 'He is already here. But you need not be afraid.' He reached up, and with icy fingertips he touched Sir Bors' battle-scarred, heavily bearded face. 'You have stood too long. It is time you took your rest.'

Sir Bors jerked upright and stared to the west. Fast riders were entering the town. It was Fyn MacDair and the other scouts.

'The Sheriff's men – heading this way,' Sir Fyn panted, heaving his sprinter to a halt. 'Rangers – a dozen or more – over the brow of that hill. And others with them – the look of mercenaries.'

Resisting the temptation to run, Sir Bors strode back towards the main body of his men, who were already snapping into action. ‘Oak leaf formation – Sir Derrick at the spine,’ the overlord shouted. ‘Squires, remain afoot, form a shield wall. Rowland – stay with the boy, keep him out of sight.’

Mounting his own destrier, hoisting his shield, Sir Bors watched the rival warband crest the line of hills and pour towards the town. He counted fifteen regular rangers, wearing their black half-armor and blood-red cloaks. The emblem of a snarling wolf livid against their breastplates. Riding ahead of these soldiers were another dozen men. These were dressed in scarlet robes. At first glance they might almost be holy men, except each wore a sword and dagger at his waist.

At the rear of the company were shire horses, each pair hauling a long-cart. Riding upon the carts were children. They were barefoot, dressed in nothing but sackcloth. *Slaves*, Sir Bors thought, counting thirteen, fourteen, more. He turned his eyes from them; they were unarmed and unimportant.

Lastly, he studied the rider at the head of the warband. This man provided the most striking sight of all. His armor was made of dark, heavy leather. But not tooled leather of the usual sort; rather it was a rough pelt, still patched here and there with fur.

It was horsehide. The band’s leader was dressed head to foot in the pelt of a horse. It formed his trowse, and even his boots, and all the way up to his cowl, which hung low over his eyes. It also formed a mouth-mask, obscuring the lower half of his face. Only his arms and shoulders were left exposed.

‘Guy of Gisbourne,’ said Sir Bors.

‘You know him?’ asked Sir Derrick.

‘A week ago, Lady Marian sent a message from the forest. She wanted me to know the Sheriff has a new chief enforcer. A heretic hunter he lured back from the Holy Lands. She couldn’t

tell me much more than his name, but she did say he goes garbed in horsehide.'

The opposing warband came to a standstill and the leader stepped his mount forward alone. Sir Bors walked his own destrier, and the two men met at the boundary stone.

At close quarters, the stranger was enormous, his bare shoulders like the haunches of a bull. His arms were ropes of sinew amid slabs of muscle. Ordinarily, Sir Bors would expect such bulk to make a man slow, but there was nothing sluggish about this masked man. Quite the opposite. His hulking hands would not lie still, but kept clenching and unclenching. His muscles twitched, sending tremors down his arms. More than anything, he put Sir Bors in mind of a stallion, desperate to run, struggling to contain its own strength.

But Sir Bors had outmatched many imposing warriors, and he trusted his knights to best any band of mere mercenaries, so he met the stranger's gaze with a look of disdain.

'You took a chance riding upon us unannounced,' he growled. 'I might have sent forth my squires, allowed them to use you for javelin practice. Fortunately for you, we are occupied, so you may pass unchallenged.'

'Unchallenged,' the stranger echoed, his voice guttural through his mask. 'A quaint notion from an age long past. I was told you would make a worthy adversary, Sir Bors – but I think not. You are like the old gods of the Earth – once powerful, now decrepit. All that remains is your final extinction.'

Sir Bors ground his teeth. 'Already I've heard enough of this. You know my name – therefore you must know I've slain many of the Sheriff's rabid dogs. State your business here, before I forget my manners.'

'Certainly I know your name,' the stranger said. 'I know plenty more besides. I know you serve the rebel, Robin Hood. I know—'

‘I serve no one.’

‘—I know that even now you are travelling to Sherwood, escorting one of the forest-spawn.’

‘Show me your face, damn you. Your name is Guy of Gisbourne, correct?’

‘My name matters little. Only my work is important.’

Sir Bors looked back at the poisoned heart-spring, and the town that had died around it. ‘Is this your work? Then you are worse than a rabid dog. You are a curse, spreading nothing but death and darkness.’

At this last word, the stranger flinched, as if struck.

‘Darkness?’ he repeated, half turning to look up at Sherwood. ‘No, no – the forest is the darkness. I am *illumination*. This . . .’ he swept a hand to indicate the town, and the ravaged land beyond, ‘all this is merely the spark. I bring the fire, to drive away the darkness once and for all.’

‘Gods’ teeth, spare me. I have heard the Sheriff’s lunacy from his own mouth. I do not need it echoed by his fool.’ Sir Bors turned his horse. ‘If you are still here by the time I reach my men, it will be my privilege to pour your blood into the soil.’

The opposing warband made no move to leave the field. Atop his giant warhorse, Sir Bors faced his bannermen, looming over them like a thunderhead, the burnished plates of his armour reflecting the iron cast of the sky.

‘They are fanatics,’ he boomed, ‘and will fight with the strength of belief. But they will have no answer to your discipline, or your skill at arms. Fight with honour, and with valour, and may the forest watch over you all.’

With that, he nodded to Duncan d’Orris, who blew two long notes on the clarion. And then came the noise of hooves thundering and steel plates grinding as the knights charged against the rival band.

Sir Bors rode hard at Guy of Gisbourne. The two leaders

came together just as the storm fully raged, the glare of lightning flashing from their raised swords. Guy of Gisborne met Sir Bors' strike, brushed it aside, slashed at the overlord's throat, struck steel, attacked again.

The heretic hunter was as strong as he looked, and quicker even than Sir Bors anticipated. But the overlord had the greater experience. Instinctively, he noted that his opponent parried high attacks too flush, taking on the full weight of each blow. So Sir Bors kept striking high, bringing his sword down again and again, driving his rival into the saddle.

But then something caught his eye, made him hold his next strike. He saw scampering figures, moving near.

The slaves.

They were entering the battleground. Why? They were barely dressed, let alone armed. What could they achieve, beyond getting trampled to death?

Forget them. Focus on the task in hand. He spared a glance for the wider battle – his knights were proving fearsome, and resolute, scattering the rangers, driving back the warrior monks.

The sight put fresh fire in him. He raised his sword, roared. Guy of Gisbourne parried his blow, and the next, and a third. But now he was truly on the defensive, and off balance – it was time for Sir Bors to press—

Something pricked his neck.

And then again on his cheek – like the sting of an insect.

His right eye twitched. He held his blade, circled his adversary.

He gained a closer look at one of the slaves. And he realized he had been wrong to think them unarmed. They each carried a reed pipe, which they kept placing to their lips.

'Poison!' he bellowed. 'Poison darts!'

Already his voice sounded strange to his own ears. Beneath him his horse had become a soft texture. And those blowpipes were still sighing, the darts still biting . . .

Sir Bors roared, tried to charge Guy of Gisbourne. But instead of moving forwards he was lurching backwards and the sky was spinning to black.

When the blackness cleared, Sir Bors found himself lying on his back. The storm had passed, leaving the sky blue and pacific. The smell of fresh air, and of wet grass, took him back to his boyhood, and for a moment he was as happy as he could ever remember.

But then he blinked, and his head throbbed – and the horror of defeat. Painfully he let his head fall to one side. All his men were sprawled upon the ground. With great relief, he saw one of them twitch, and another. They too had been drugged, but thank the gods they lived.

Guy of Gisbourne noted he was awake and came to stand over him.

‘Poison,’ Sir Bors croaked. ‘A coward’s weapon.’

‘A weapon is a weapon. Only men like you make the distinction. And men like you are relics.’ The heretic hunter looked towards Sherwood Forest. ‘Your master, Robin Hood – he too is a relic. Even worse – he *wields* relics, does he not? The shadow of the demon, and its skin.’ Once more he stared down at the overlord, his eyes black with hatred. ‘I promise you this – all relics shall be returned to the Earth.’

Letting his head fall to one side, Sir Bors locked his attention on the Sheriff’s rangers. While the warrior monks stood and watched, the soldiers were digging fresh pits in the town’s graveyard. Were they burying their own, or had some of Sir Bors’ men been killed after all?

‘These knights are valuable hostages,’ he slurred, his tongue still thick with the poison. ‘My household will pay a fortune for each and every one returned alive. Even the squires will fetch a high price.’

The heretic hunter shook his head. 'This is not your age of heroes. This war will not be won with gold, any more than it will be won with steel.' His black eyes blazed. 'In any case, you and your men need time to repent. You must be allowed that time – even to the end.'

He looked over to his followers and beckoned. Two warrior monks came and took hold of Sir Bors. And then they were dragging him across the ground, towards one of the open graves.

And understanding dawned. And for the first time in years, perhaps for the first time in his life, Sir Bors was truly afraid.

'No – kill us!' he tried to shout. 'By all that is sacred, kill us first!'

But his words were as useless as his limbs. The warrior monks dragged him to one of the pits, and they heaved and tipped him in. Falling onto his back, Sir Bors roared at the sky. The warrior monks threw sacking across his face, through which he sucked desperate breaths.

And now he felt soil raining down upon him, and little by little all sounds of the world began to fade, and inch by inch all light was extinguished.

Elsewhere in the town, the victors were dragging other drugged knights and squires towards the graves, the vanquished men moaning and struggling in vain.

'Leave one above ground,' Guy of Gisbourne growled, lowering his mask. 'News of this must reach Robin Hood and his wildwood queen.'

Meanwhile, the boy they called Jack Frost stood silently to one side, his ancient eyes weeping. For a moment he watched the unfolding horror. But then he turned his gaze. He had already seen all this, and he knew it was nothing.

Because he had seen what else was coming.

And he knew it would sweep everything else from its path.

Part One

Homelands

I. Elysium Glades

‘Robin, this is ludicrous,’ Marian said, as she shuffled blind through the forest. ‘I mean it, we need to go back, right now. To think of everything we’re up against – and we’re out here playing children’s games. I can’t believe I let you talk me into it in the first place.’

‘It’s not a game, it’s vital,’ Robin said, holding her hand and guiding her down the narrowing path. ‘You’ll understand once we get there.’

‘Vital?’ she said, one arm outstretched, patting at the air ahead of her. ‘I’ll tell you what’s vital. Soldiers are setting up garrisons on the edge of the forest, more of them by the day. Barons are paying off the Sheriff, swelling his war chest. I’ve got raids to organize, spies to brief, outlaw chiefs at each other’s throats as always. The gods only know what chaos is reigning back there without me.’

‘Let them sort out their own squabbles,’ Robin said. ‘The world isn’t going to end the moment you lower your guard.’

She stumbled over something and swore. ‘Anyway, you know I hate surprises. If we’re not there by the count of ten, I’m taking off this blindfold.’

‘Just wait – it’s at the end of this next path.’ With the fingertips of his free hand, he brushed the bole of an oak tree, reading

the unique patterns of its bark. ‘Yes, this is where we turn. Steady. There are sinkholes either side.’

‘All I can say is, this wondrous place of yours had better be worth it – for your own sake. In any case, I’m not staying long, I hope you know that. I’ll take a look, since we—’

She fell silent because Robin had led her through a curtain of hanging vines, come to an abrupt halt, and in the same motion whipped away her blindfold. In an instant everything else was forgotten. Now all Marian could do was stand and stare, blinking in the sunlight.

She and Robin had found many sublime places within Sherwood Forest, but she could see immediately that this outshone them all. It was an open glade, ringed with beech trees the height of cathedrals, the light through their leaves gleaming like stained-glass windows. Within this temple-like space was a lake, the water so clear the fish appeared to be swimming in empty air. And beyond the lake were smaller pools and ponds and little waterfalls. And there were clouds of butterflies shimmering in bands of sunlight, and halcyon birds dipping in and out of the water, throwing up miniature rainbows.

She squeezed Robin’s hand, feeling a strange stab of sorrow. *Oh, Robin. You’ll never see this place for yourself, not with your own eyes.*

She didn’t say it out loud, and it was a ridiculous thing to even think. Robin might be sightless, but his other senses were god-like in their acuity. In fact, Robin could sense his surroundings in ways she could barely imagine; his impression of these glades would be far deeper than anything she could ever hope to experience.

Even so, her own senses were overflowing – the fresh inviting smell of the water, and the choir of the songbirds, and the rhythm of the whistling frogs – it was glorious!

‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ she said, already stripping off her smock and kirtle. ‘You brought me all this way, so don’t just stand there. Come on, race you to the island!’

She clambered onto a high shelf of rock. Then she swallowed into the lake, gasping at the thrilling cold and yelling her exhilaration underwater.

As she resurfaced, and threw back her hair, she saw that Robin had climbed onto the rock shelf. He made an impressive sight standing there, his wolfskin cloak gathered around him, bulky at his chest and shoulders, like the mane of some legendary beast. His head was tipped forward, the wolf-head cowl masking his face, its fur ruffling in the breeze. Marian shivered. It could still strike her, even now – the savage splendour of Robin Hood.

He still hadn't moved an inch, as if he was listening intently, and Marian said: 'What is it? What have you heard?'

Finally he shook his head, shrugged off his shortbow and quiver. 'Nothing important.'

'So why aren't you in here with me?'

Standing up in the shallows, she launched water at him. In response he sprang down from the rock shelf and charged into the lake, sweeping a wave over her head. She growled and lunged at him and then they were playfighting and splashing and ducking one another, their laughter echoing off the water and amplified within the glade.

Eventually Marian untangled herself and swam away, sculling on her back, her eyes closed against the sun. Taking a deep breath, she swam down deep with the fishes and the waterweeds. The bracing water washed away the last of her frustrations, and by the time she resurfaced she felt revived and ecstatic.

'You want me to say it,' she said, treading water. 'Fine. You were right. Coming here wasn't such a bad idea. Let the rest look after themselves for a while. Why should I always have to hold their hands? Did I tell you about the White Crows? What Aks Arqua said to me after—'

'Don't even think about him,' Robin said. 'Not about any of

them – not today. I thought you wanted a race. Maybe you're chicken.'

They swam for the island, and Marian was winning until Robin grabbed her ankle, pulled her back, and then they were splashing and wrestling and laughing once more, as joyful and careless as if they were children again and this was one of their endless summers back on her father's estate.

Finally they called a truce and pulled themselves onto the wooded islet at the heart of the lake. It was still only the month of May, yet it was almost hot enough to be midsummer. They basked in the sun until they dried off, then crawled into the shade beneath two willow trees which arched together to form a natural bower.

'I could believe the gods sculpted this place just for us,' Marian said, resting her head on a pillow of moss. 'There's a breeze to keep the insects away. And there's rockrose and lavender over there, so it even smells perfect.' She sat up, looked at him. 'Earlier, you said coming here was vital. What did you mean?'

Robin paused. 'Well, what I meant was . . . without this, there's no point in all the rest of it. Being with you. Just us. This is . . . what I fight for.'

Marian smiled. 'I knew that's what you meant, but I wanted to hear you say it.' She kissed her fingers, then pressed them to his forehead, as had been their custom since they were seven years old. 'One day we'll win our fight. And when we do, I want to come back here with you, and I want to never leave. Agreed?'

Lying back, she watched the shifting patterns of sunlight and shade, and she listened to the birds and the whistling frogs, and she felt the cold of the water still tingling her skin, and for the first time in as long as she could remember she was truly happy and at peace.

When she next looked at Robin, she saw he was sitting very

still. He had his head tipped to one side, like an owl judging the direction of its prey.

‘You’re doing it again – listening to something I can’t hear. What is it?’

‘I’ll tell you,’ he said, ‘but you might think it’s crazy. I’ve been listening to the trees. I’m trying to understand what they’re saying.’

She sat up and laughed in delight. ‘Crazy? But Robin, this is marvellous! You’re serious? Why have you never told me this before? The trees talk to each other! How?’

‘In a few different ways, I think. I’m only just learning how to listen. There are these crackling, fizzing sounds underground. For the longest time I didn’t know what they were. But they’re signals, they must be, passing through the rootlets.’

She gasped. ‘And the rootlets intertwine, is that it, one tree to another?’

‘Yes. And not just to their neighbours. The connections keep going. I think the strands spread like a web beneath the entire forest.’

Marian stared around her open-mouthed, the magic and mystery of this place increasing a hundredfold. ‘I’ve always had this feeling, always, that the trees aren’t as mute as they seem. And it’s true – you can hear them! So what are they saying, right at this moment?’

‘That’s what caught my attention. They sound . . . agitated.’

Marian frowned. ‘Agitated? In this Eden? Why?’

‘I don’t know. It’s frustrating. It’s like overhearing a thousand conversations, and they’re all in a foreign language. But recently . . . I can’t help thinking their tone has changed. Right now, it’s intense. As though the trees are shouting.’

Marian shook her head, closed her eyes. *The trees are shouting.* She could hear the music of the songbirds, and the percussion of the woodpeckers, and the murmuring of the insects. But

try as she might, she could hear nothing from the silent giants surrounding these glades.

‘So, the trees’ agitation . . . their warnings,’ she said, ‘it’s nothing for us to worry about?’

‘I don’t think so. It’s their world.’ Robin lay down beside her. ‘I don’t suppose I’ll ever truly understand what they’re saying. In any case, they’re quietening down again now.’

They lay there for a while in silence, Marian thinking about the trees chattering, imagining them sharing news and memories and gossip, finding the idea absurdly pleasing.

The warm breeze blew across her, bringing sensuous scents of spring, and her mind turned to other things.

‘When was the last time we were properly alone like this?’

Rolling onto her stomach, she kissed him, and every inch of her tingled. Years ago, during her exile in Spain, many young noblemen had come to her father’s court and tried to seduce her. She remembered them all as tame peacocks, with their starched doublets and peaked shoes, their hair slick with unction, stinking of perfumes. Not one of them was worth a second glance.

Robin, on the other hand, in all his rough majesty . . . there were times she couldn’t take her eyes off him, or keep her hands to herself. Years of living wild had given him the sleek muscled frame of a forest predator. His musky scent carried tones of rich loam and mossy undergrowth and all the things that were life-giving and vital. She breathed that scent now and her kisses became fevered.

He returned her kisses, and his sightless hands worked across her face and her body, examining her as closely as if he’d never touched her before. And there beneath the willow blossom, the wildwood humming and thrumming around them, their passion rose towards something fierce and uncontainable.

But then, as Marian’s head fell to one side, she found herself

staring into a human face. There was a girl, crouching on the far side of the lake, naked amid the undergrowth, her cascade of red hair pooled around her.

Marian's breath stopped as she stared back at the girl. Except, of course, she wasn't a girl at all – that was merely her surface appearance. As always, her eyes gave her away. Her eyes were golden, and split down the centre, like the eyes of a vixen.

'She's here,' Marian hissed.

'Ignore her. She has nothing to do with us.'

'But . . . she's watching. Robin, stop it.'

He went on kissing her neck and caressing her, regardless. Breathlessly, Marian whispered for him to stop, desperate for him to continue.

The vixen-goddess watched them with her head cocked to one side, as if puzzled and curious. Then she stood and moved around the lake, coming closer. As she did so, she appeared to change. Yes – she was growing taller, and her body shape was morphing, becoming that of a young woman. And as this transformation took place, her look of curiosity dropped away, to be replaced by one of understanding, and then of fury. She stopped and stared and her expression hardened further, becoming a look of pure seething jealousy.

Seeing this, Marian found herself smiling. Tightening her grip on Robin, she dragged him down into the bed of moss. And there beneath the glare of the goddess, she gave herself fully to Robin and to their shared desire.

At dusk, Robin sat listening for the goddess of the forest, but heard nothing. His nose twitched – there was no hint of her scent on the breeze. She had left them alone, at last. He returned his full attention to Marian, who was sleeping at his side. He stroked her lustrous, hawk-brown hair, and ran his touch across the silken skin of her neck and chin and cheeks. With his fingertips

he traced the moon-shaped scar that curved perfectly around her right eye.

It was almost frightening, the strength of his love for her. Of all the forces acting upon his life, of all the powers earthly and demonic at war within him, his love for Marian was the one thing he had always found truly irresistible, against which he was entirely defenceless. He would sacrifice his own life for her in an instant, that was beyond question. And while this idea seemed perfectly natural and correct, there were times when the great weight of it left him awestruck, as powerless against it as a single leaf in the path of a thunderstorm.

Breathing deeply, slowly releasing such thoughts, he lay down beside her. As he did so, a sharp sensation pierced his awareness. Robin had learned to read Sherwood in the closest detail – to sense the web of interconnections that link every living thing in the forest. Now the strands of that web were trembling, one creature shrieking a warning, another flapping away in alarm, a third freezing in fear, so on and so on until the vibrations reached Robin even at this distance.

He sat up, gritting his teeth. The source of the disturbance was a long way away; even his phenomenal senses couldn't provide a clear impression of what was happening. But only one kind of creature could cause such a brutal quaking of the life-web. He knew he should alert Marian at once.

No – not today, even they can wait, he told himself. *Give us this one perfect day he can't taint.*

Dragging his awareness out of the far forest, refusing to acknowledge anything now beyond these enchanted glades, he settled once more at Marian's side. He listened to her breathing, and the sound of the waterfalls. And as the gloaming deepened, and moonlight bathed the lake, he drifted into his own blissful sleep.

II. Silent Dawn

It was not a sound that woke Marian, but rather the silence. Detaching herself from Robin, she crawled out of their bower and crouched at the water's edge. Mist was drifting upon the lake, ghostly in the first light of day.

But nothing else stirred, and there was barely a sound. A single plop where a frog leaped off a rock. A lone skittering of claws along a branch. Eeriest of all was the lack of birdsong. By now the birds should have been in full voice, singing their dawn chorus, but Marian strained to listen and didn't hear a single woodnote.

The forest is always the first to know, she thought, holding her breath, the wildwood seeming to do the same all around her. Something this way comes.

In the next instant the stillness was shattered – a sentry horn wailed through the forest. Birds burst from their roosts so violently, and in such numbers, it looked as though the trees themselves were exploding.

In a heartbeat Robin was at her side, his fingers splayed against the ground, his head bowed.

'What is it?' Marian whispered. 'Tell me it's only scouting patrols.'

To the south-west, from high up in a guard nest, another sentry sounded the alarm. It was followed by a third sentry,

and a fourth, the noise tearing through the treetops. And now there was a definite rhythm to the blasts: two long, followed by three short.

Marian sucked a breath. 'It's not scouts, it's raiding parties – we're under attack! Hurry, we need to get back!'

She plunged into the water and swam across the lake, Robin following in her wake. On the far bank she pulled on her kirtle, leaving the rest of her clothes where they lay. Strapping her shortbow and quiver across her back, she left the glades at a run.

'Marian, wait, slow down,' Robin called, as more horns blared. 'I think . . . I think there are soldiers close.'

'Close? They can't have come this deep into the forest – the sentries have only just raised the alarm. And how come you didn't get wind of it?' She shot a glance back at him. 'Unless you *did* know something.'

'There was a hint of it last night, but I—'

'Last night!'

'I thought it was a lone patrol, and presumed it must be scouts. He hasn't sent raiding parties in weeks. Marian, hold on. There's so much noise I can't—'

'Listen – more horns to the north – they're coming from all sides!' She ran on, even faster. 'If they break through to the main encampments we're finished!'

Robin's nose twitched. He caught tangy scents of sweat and blood and steel.

'Rangers dead ahead. Five-hundred yards.'

Marian's pace slackened, but only for a moment, then she continued headlong down the path. 'I need to get back. Without me the bands will be headless.'

'No they won't. They know their roles – you've made sure of it. Marian, wait, this is madness!'

He managed to grab hold of her and drag her to a halt.

She wrestled to be free. 'Let go of me!'

‘No. Stop and think. What if you’re hurt out here, or captured? Then the Sheriff wins.’

Finally, Marian stopped struggling. She rubbed at her eyes. ‘All right, it’s true – I wasn’t thinking straight. One moment I was dreaming in paradise . . . then all this. So then. Those soldiers up ahead – can you find us a way past?’

‘It won’t be a direct route. And we’ll risk running into other squads.’

‘Let’s go. Get us back as fast as you can.’

Robin placed one tip of his bow against his instep, bent the wood and looped the string into place. Marian did the same and they set off again, more steadily, arrows nocked to their bowstrings.

Robin sniffed out a trail of old badger paths, densely shadowed by overhanging yew trees. Then he led the way along an ancient riverbed, sunken and secretive. They covered the ground far more stealthily and swiftly than the Sheriff’s men, and soon they were slipping through their ranks.

As they crept along a hidden gulch, Robin heard soldiers on either side, shockingly close. The crunch of their nailed boots as they snapped twigs and crushed ground nests underfoot. The crack where branches broke against their breastplates.

He sensed Marian holding her breath, and he heard his own pulse pounding in his ears. He was angry with himself – if he hadn’t ignored what he had sensed last night, then he and Marian wouldn’t be isolated out here and she wouldn’t be in such grave danger. But the bulk of his fury was reserved for the Sheriff’s men. Why did they have to come here in the first place? How dare they drag him and Marian from their idyll and force them into this deadly game of hide and seek?

As they climbed to a high trail, and passed above more rangers in a gulley below, Robin felt a coldness seeping beneath his skin. It began in his bow hand, then spread into his forearm

and up into his shoulder. As it spread it made a tiny splintering noise, like black ice cracking.

It was stirring.

The shadow-shard. His curse-gift from the forest gods.

The shadow spread faster, and became more intense, seeping across his upper back, tightening in his tendons and his muscles. Suddenly it burst to the surface, bubbling up though his bow arm, tendrils of it writhing like a nest of black snakes. The dread thing tugged at him, a deadly puppet master, demanding he raise his bow and take aim at the men below.

No – no! Gritting his teeth, he gripped his right wrist in his left hand and fought to keep the arm still. *You can't fight this many on your own.*

He wrestled against the god-shadow, while its tendrils writhed and twisted. Finally, as they outdistanced the last of the rangers, he won the struggle. With a final spasm, the shadow released its grip on him, winding back into his bow arm and sinking beneath his skin.

Robin swept onwards, vaulting mossy boulders and hurdling rotten logs, while behind him Marian kept pace, as quick-footed as a fox.

Soon they were crossing the outer perimeter of Fortress Sherwood. Above them now, suspended in the boughs by vine-ropes, was a murder-ball bristling with sharpened stakes. They bypassed a boulder balanced as a deadfall trap, crept beneath boughs strung with spiked nets, around snares and between speared deathpits. They threaded their way through all this, knowing exactly where to place each footstep.

And now, finally, they reached Gaia's River. They leaped up on a log bridge and padded across. When they stepped down on the far bank, the forest opened up around them. Here was a sweeping range of glades and gullies and clearings, dotted with outlaw encampments.

Three people came running to meet them. For Marian, with the forest full of invaders, it was a profound relief to set eyes on these young women, all three dressed for war and armed with bows and daggers.

In the lead was Minnie Reaper, small and dark and savage as a wildcat. Behind her came Aimee Clearwater, a tall redhead, as deadly with a bow as she was beautiful. Sonskya Luz was pale and slight, but as dangerous as any outlaw in Sherwood, a hint of murderous madness in her ice-blue eyes.

‘You picked a fine time to go walkabout,’ said Minnie, as they drew together. ‘We knew the Sheriff was saving up for something big. Well, here it is.’

‘Thank the gods you’re safe, that’s all,’ said Aimee, throwing her arms around Marian. ‘Even Alice didn’t know where you were.’

‘You’ve clearly been enjoying yourself, since you’re practically naked,’ said Sonskya. ‘Here, I thought you might want this.’

She was holding Marian’s prized battle armour, consisting of breastplate and skirt and wrist bracers, all made of the toughest dark-red leather.

‘Tell me what we’re up against,’ said Marian, as she dressed. ‘Regular rangers? Mercenaries?’

‘Can’t say for sure,’ said Sonskya. ‘We’re still waiting for some of the scouts to report.’

‘We’ve split Baphomet’s Horde in two,’ said Aimee. ‘The same with the White Crows. It was the only way to cover all the northern posts.’

‘We’re even more strung out to the west,’ said Minnie. ‘I’ve been saying for months that’s where we’re vulnerable.’

‘Aimee, run back to Major Oak,’ said Marian. ‘Tell Alice and Seren to stay behind to wait for scouts and run messages. Bring the rest of the girls to us.’

She turned to Robin, who was kneeling, his palms pressed to the earth, reading the vibrations through the forest floor.

‘What can you tell me?’

Robin shook his head. ‘There are so many – it’s hard to build a clear picture. But they’re coordinated. I’d say they’re planning to hit us on all sides at once.’ He hesitated. ‘There’s something else. Something . . . out of place.’

‘What do you mean?’

Again, he shook his head. ‘Nothing specific. Like I’m missing something.’

‘I can’t work with vague misgivings. Let me know when you can put a name to it.’

Aimee returned from Major Oak with seven more of Marian’s hawks, all of them armed and armoured. They each had bands of black warpaint streaked across their eyes, giving them the fierce look of birds of prey. Aimee held out a tincture jar. Marian dabbed her fingers and daubed warpaint across her own eyes.

‘So then, we’re ready,’ she told her hawks. ‘We’ll form a mobile force, buttressing weak spots. Our line is spread thin – to the west, so we’ll head that way first. All right, let’s go.’

At a half-run, Marian led the way westwards across the glades and the clearings. The outlaws’ encampments were all deserted, scattered with blankets and bed mats, flung aside when the sentry horns wailed through the dawn forest.

They reached the western sweep of Gaia’s River, using a log bridge to pad across. A few hundred paces further on, they came to the foot of Gargan’s Ridge.

Coming to a halt, Marian cupped her hands to her mouth and made a mewing noise, which to an untrained ear would sound exactly like a forest hawk. A moment later the response came back – a barking below, like that of a stag.

‘All clear,’ she said. ‘Let’s go.’

She led the others up the wooded slope. At the top they found two of Will Scarlett's men – Ironside and Borston Black. They were lying on their stomachs amid the undergrowth, dried leaves trapped in their grey-black beards. As ever, when battle loomed, these two veteran warriors made a reassuring sight. They were both of them built like barrels, and as tough as old bull badgers, and not for the first time Marian gave silent thanks that they were on her side.

'Well look who it isn't,' Ironside grunted. 'Lady Marian, no less, and Robin. The last I heard, you'd left us in the lurch.'

Ignoring him, Marian moved on in a half-crouch, leading the others along the crest of the ridge. They passed more of Will Scarlett's crew. Jack Champion, Much and Midge Millerson and Ayala Baptiste. Their faces were darkened with ash and charcoal, so that in the deep shadows only the whites of their eyes showed as they wordlessly watched Marian and her hawks creep past.

At the far end of the ridge was Will Scarlett himself. He was lying low and motionless, his broad Saracen sword buried in the leaf litter so the glint of steel wouldn't give him away. At his side was a stack of cut logs, lashed together with vine-ropes. An axe stood ready to sever the bindings and send a cascade of timber crashing down the slope, crushing any soldiers below.

Dropping to her stomach, Marian snake-crawled close to him.

'What are you facing?' she whispered. 'Numbers?'

Grim-faced, Will tipped his head to the west. 'They're out beyond that rise. Eric's gone into the canopy to take a look.'

No sooner had he said this, than the leaves rustled and Eric O'Lincoln appeared, wrapped in his bosky hunting cloak, his face dark beneath his hood.

'I counted two dozen,' Eric breathed, laying his bow across his knees. 'There might have been more behind.'

Marian took a long breath. 'Well, we've beaten bad odds before. And the forest works for us, not for them.'

Will Scarlett nodded. 'They won't get past us here.'

Crouching nearby, Robin listened to this, and he knew Will's confidence was well-founded. For the defenders, there could be no better terrain than Gargan's Ridge. Down below, the only trail narrowed as it ran between the river and boggy marshland. Funnelled into this bottleneck, the invaders would make easy targets for the outlaws' arrows and the rocks from their sling-shots, not to mention those caught by the avalanche of rolling logs. Any soldier who survived this onslaught would come floundering to the foot of the ridge, where they would find Will and his skirmishers waiting to drop upon them with blades bared.

And yet, even as Robin knew all this to be true, some part of him was whispering caution. An unknown sense nagged at him, insisting that something here was not as it seemed. That this battle would not play so neatly into the defenders' hands . . .

'We'll stand with you as long as we can,' Marian told Will Scarlett. 'But if the line buckles elsewhere we might be called away.'

'Extra archers would be a godsend,' said Will. 'They'll do most damage at the northern end of the ridge. I'll tell Midge to—'

'Hold on,' said Robin. 'The soldiers . . . I think – yes, they're turning.'

'What do you mean? They can't be,' said Marian. 'Every path runs through here.'

'They're cutting new trails,' said Robin. 'They're slashing through the undergrowth.'

'So they know we're here,' said Eric. 'They're trying to bypass the ridge.'

'I was afraid of this,' said Will. 'The Sheriff has sent a lot of scouts, and we haven't caught them all.'

Marian growled. 'We have to stop them here. If they get behind us, we'll risk—'

At that moment, a thunderous noise arose in the distance. It was a battle roar, together with the blaring of horns, followed an instant later by the hissing of arrows, and the clash of swords, and screams.

'They've hit the line to the east,' Marian said through the noise. 'Aimee,' she called over her shoulder. 'Run a message to Gaia's Reach. We need—'

She broke off at a second eruption of noise, this time from the north. These sounds were closer and even more dreadful. The crack of quarterstaves breaking heads; the thwack of arrows puncturing flesh; the blunt wet crunch of mantraps slamming shut.

'Woden's Wall,' Marian breathed. 'Lyssa, go to Aks Arqua. I need a full report. Ena, the same from Doghed McGee. Get back here quick as you can. Robin – those soldiers ahead of us. Focus on them and nothing else.'

Robin was attempting to do exactly that. But it was impossible. Even now, more fighting was breaking out to the south, and the forest had become so full of violent noise and motion that his attention was being wrenched in every direction.

So then, he must let go of his human senses and draw on something more potent instead. Squatting back on his heels, becoming utterly motionless, he allowed all noise and vibration to wash over him and pass through him, without trying to judge their direction or grasp at their meaning. Within moments it all drifted to a kind of silence, Robin's awareness floating free and untouched within it.

Now he reached out with his forest-mind. Sending it rippling westwards. Feeling for the invisible threads of action and reaction that shimmer beneath the surface world, connecting every living thing in Sherwood. The frantic flight of a jackdaw;

the scampering claws of a squirrel; the warning bellow of a boar; the answering call of its mate.

Suddenly Robin is a part of it all, minutely aware of every creature that flies and scurries and burrows. He piggybacks on their senses, knowing the world through the compound eyes of flies, and the whiskers of moles, and the bellies of snakes. Just for a moment all this is dizzying – like looking back at himself from a thousand different directions – but he breathes deeply and the vision holds.

And now, in minute detail, he studies the soldiers to the west. The stench of sweat at the back of their necks. The fear and hatred thumping in their hearts. The muttering of their curses and their prayers.

‘Well, Robin? Speak. What have you found – what are they doing?’

Before Robin could respond, someone else came charging to the crest of the ridge. It was another of Marian’s hawks, Alice White, her breathing short and ragged.

‘Word from Hydra’s League!’ Alice panted, dropping at Marian’s side. ‘Blodwyn Kage – she says the Sheriff must have mapped their position. The soldiers have bypassed the main defences.’

Marian sprang to her feet, gripping her bow.

‘Go back to Blodwyn,’ she told Alice. ‘Tell her to hold her ground. I’ll bring help, just as soon as I can. But we have to win this battle first. Will, you and your men stay here. I want you to spring your ambush, just as you’d planned.’

Will rose to one knee. ‘How, if they keep their distance?’

‘Let me worry about that. Just be ready. When Ena and Lyssa get back, tell them to hold here with you. Everyone else, follow me.’

Already she was heading down the leeward slope, Robin and her hawks scrambling in her wake.

‘Marian – what are you doing?’ said Robin. ‘There’s a whole battalion down there. There’s eight of us!’

‘They won’t know that,’ said Marian. ‘We’ll kick up a fuss, make them think there are hordes of us.’

‘You want to herd them back to the ridge,’ said Minnie. ‘Then Will can slam the trap shut.’

‘No – it won’t work,’ said Robin, as they dashed along a deer track. ‘There are too many. They won’t turn.’

‘We just need to spread enough fear,’ said Marian. ‘Then the greener ones will panic.’

Her mind was made up; it was futile to argue any further. All Robin could do now was follow in her footsteps, keep his senses honed, and brace himself for bloodshed.